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ABSTRACT

Designed as an overview of the progress of middle schools in the last two decades, this document compares results from a 1968 survey that sampled 10 percent of middle schools with at least three, and not more than five grades, and including grades 6 and 7, with those of a similar 1988 survey. Following a brief summary of the origins of the middle school is a discussion of survey results regarding changes in rationale and specific preparation undertaken for introducing middle school organization and problems perceived in teacher education. Survey results are discussed as they relate to the following characteristics of good middle schools: (1) an interdisciplinary organization with a flexibly scheduled day; (2) an adequate guidance program including a team advisory plan; (3) a full-scale exploratory program; (4) comprehensive curriculum that provides for students' personal development, acquisition of learning skills, and basic knowledge; (5) varied and effective age-appropriate methodology; and (6) continued orientation and articulation for students, parents, and teachers. Finally, conclusions are presented regarding the differences between schools containing grades 5-8 or 6-8 and those with grades 7 and 8 or 7-9. Included are four tables and five graphs. (8 references) (CLA)

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Schools in the Middle: Progress 1968-1988

By William M. Alexander and C. Kenneth McEwin

A major development in American school organization and programs during the twentieth century has been the movement from a two-level elementary and secondary school organization to a three-level organization: elementary, middle, and high school.

The schools in the middle, variously introduced, reorganized, or renamed as "junior high schools," "middle schools," and "intermediate schools," link their feeder elementary schools to the high schools. Today, recognition of the great importance of education at this level is becoming increasingly common, especially with the impetus of the report of the Carnegie Task Force on Education of Young Adolescents released in June 1989.

This report, Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century, declares that: "Middle grade schools — junior high, intermediate and middle schools — are potentially society's most powerful force to recapture millions of youth adrift, and help every young person thrive during early adolescence."[1] Their eight major recommendations encompass the six criteria or earmarks we use to appraise today's schools. Our conclusions indicate that progress is being made, but far too slowly.

The first schools to come between elementary and high schools—junior high schools—had become very popular by 1960, when approximately four out of every five high school graduates had gone through a 6-3-3 (elementary-junior-senior high) school organization, reversing the 1920 statistic of four out of every five having gone through an 8-4 (elementary-high school) plan. By 1960, however, dissatisfaction with the three-level plan, specifically the junior high school, was evident in many areas. A search for alternatives resulted in a new "middle school" plan, usually consisting of grades 6-8 or 5-8, that spread rapidly.

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The Surveys, 1968 and 1988

William M. Alexander, under a Cooperative Research Grant from the U. S. Office of Education conducted a survey of middle schools in 1967-68 to provide benchmark data regarding the status of the new middle schools.[2] Only schools that had at least three grades and not more than five, and included grades 6 and 7 were surveyed. A 10 percent random sample of the 1,101 schools meeting these criteria was secured, with final data reported from 110 schools. Sections of the survey were replicated by other researchers in 1978[3] and 1981.[4] As the grades 6-8 middle school movement surpassed in number all other grade organizations (See Figure A), the authors decided that full replication of the 1968 survey after 20 years would provide useful benchmark data. The 1968 survey was replicated and expanded to include additional questions that would help identify likenesses and differences between the characteristic features (earmarks) of middle level schools in 1967-68 and 1987-88, and between schools of different grade organizations today.[5] Hereafter in this report the two surveys are referred to by the year in which they were concluded—1968 and 1988. The 1988 survey sample included:

- Middle schools as defined in the 1968 survey (schools having at least three grades and not more than five, and including grades 6 and 7)
- Schools with grades 7-8 only
- Schools with grades 7-9 only.

The latter two groups were added in the 1988 study because of the large number of schools they involved, and to compare middle level schools of different grade organizations. Reference to "middle schools" usually does not

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include these latter two, but the terms "schools in the middle" and "middle level schools" are used to refer to all schools between elementary and secondary school levels.

Survey forms were mailed to 11 percent of each of the grade organization groups. A total of 670 (56 percent) were returned and used. Data were received from all 50 states and the District of Columbia.

In this report, major attention is given to middle schools as defined in the 1968 survey, since only these school organizations were included in both surveys. The last section, however, deals with the 1988 data on all schools in the middle, including those with grades 7-8 and grades 7-9.

Why a Middle School?

The factors responsible for the establishment of the junior high school between 1910 and 1960, and of the middle school in the period thereafter, have been related elsewhere.[6] In general, the junior high school had been promoted by national education organizations and committees to improve secondary and later education, and the middle school grew up originally as an intended improvement over the earlier provisions for the age group (ages 10-14) in transition from elementary to high schools and from childhood to adolescence.

Comparisons of the relative frequency of reasons for the establishment of the new middle schools as checked by respondents (usually principals) in 1968 and 1988, indicate some refinement of rationale by 1988 toward greater emphasis on student needs and related program improvement in 1988. "To eliminate crowded conditions" was frequently checked in 1968, but had dropped to third place in 1988. "To provide a program specifically designed for children in this age group" was ranked first in 1988, second to the overcrowding factor in 1968.

Several other program-related reasons were more frequently given in 1988, including "more specialization for grades 5 and 6 students," "bridging elementary and high school," "remedying weaknesses of the junior high school," and "trying out innovations."

Certain administrative reasons were also important in the establishment of some new middle schools, and many good schools were first started without a clear devotion to the middle school goals and earmarks they later accepted and implemented.

Preparation for the New School

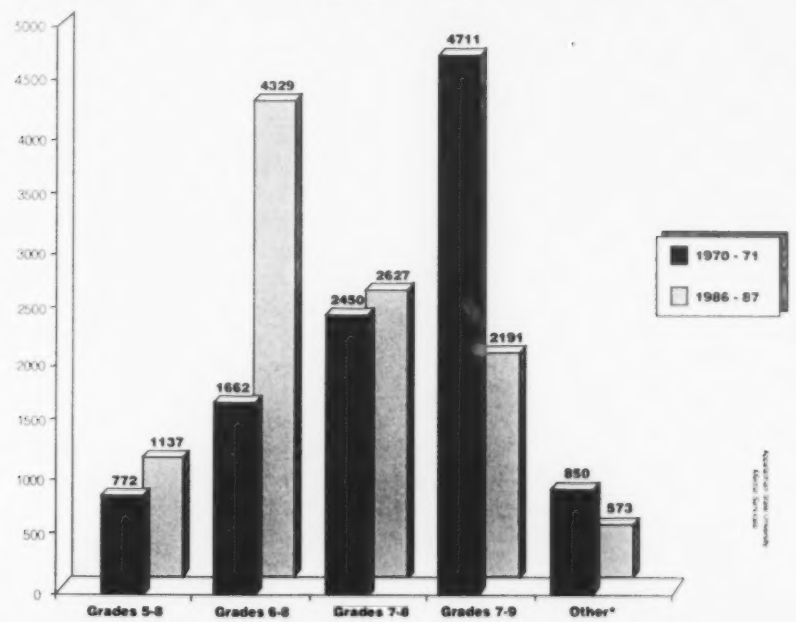
Probably most important is the evolution of the school once created. Later questions indicated much variation over the 20 years, but impressive numbers of schools did succeed in becoming "real" middle schools.

For the most part, the means of preparing for the new middle school organizations varied little in 1968 and 1988, but some differences should be noted:

- The percent of schools having provided for a year or more of faculty study and planning in the district more than doubled after 20 years.

Figure A

Number of Middle Level Schools With Various Grade Organizations, 1970-71 and 1986-87



*5th or higher, with the highest grade 7th to 9th

- The percent of schools being represented in a funded middle level project jumped from 3 to 16 percent.
- Similar increases occurred in preschool faculty workshops (5 to 27 percent) and school visitation (38 to 72 percent).

In both surveys "occasional planning sessions of prospective middle school faculty members" was the most common type of preparation, reported by more than half of the respondents, with the possibly critical input of new ideas through "visitation of schools having similar plans" and "inservice meetings with consultants" second and third respectively.

Several interesting preparatory activities were reported in the 1988 survey's open-ended blanks: "hiring the new middle school principal a full year in advance for planning/preparatory tasks"; "year of study by administration and board of education with faculty input"; "two years of intensive faculty preparation"; and "gradual institution of middle school reforms over five years with faculty involvement."

Comment

Clearly, the experience of the past 20 years has underlined the need for careful preparation of the community and school personnel for the new school. Middle level leaders have become more innovative and persistent as to methods of preparation, but more time, study, and planning are consistently needed and sought.

The Teacher Education Problem

The 1968 survey did not include a question about the preparation of teachers for the middle school. However, the concluding comment of the survey report was that: "Preservice and inservice education programs must be developed to provide an input of innovative programs and organizational practices, if the new organizations are to really differ from the old ones."

Data concerning the continuing teacher education problem are shown in Figure B. These data are not surprising in view of earlier findings that in 1981-82 only 30 percent of the teacher education institutions responding to a teacher education survey reported that they offered programs of middle level teacher education, and only 33 percent so reported in 1986-87. [7]

Certainly, adequate preparation for the conversion to three-level organizations does not yet include employment of enough specifically trained professional personnel, and therefore school districts must provide a variety of middle school inservice education opportunities. It is surprising that the middle school earmarks have been implemented as much as they have without more adequate training of middle school personnel.

Comment

Middle school representatives can help solve this problem by helping their teacher education institutions develop and improve preparation programs. They can also help by carefully checking on the preparation of teacher applicants as well as present faculty members, and offering useful inservice education to those lacking adequate preparation.

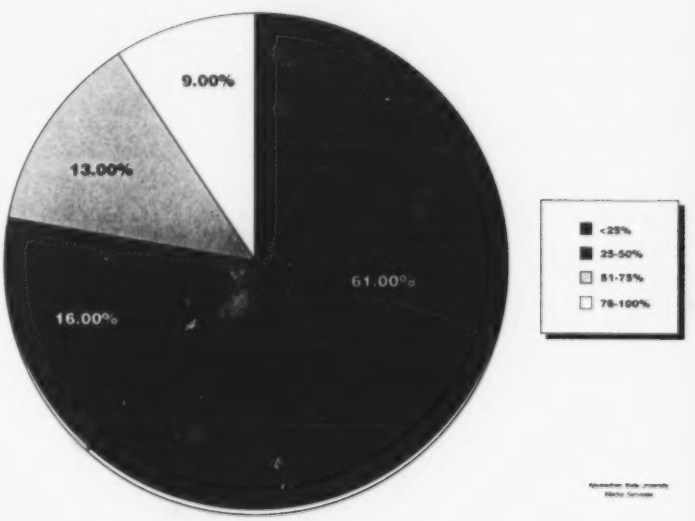
Earmarks of Good Middle Schools

The characteristics or earmarks generally considered as critical in achieving educational quality in middle schools are listed below. [8]

1. An interdisciplinary organization, with a flexibly scheduled day. Table 1 shows that the four-subject (language arts, math, science, and social studies) teaming is the characteristic type of interdisciplinary organization in these schools and that there has been considerable increase in the percent of schools using this organization in grades 5-8 from 1968 to 1988. Continuation of the traditional elementary school model—the self-contained

Figure B

Percents of Middle Level Schools Having Faculties With Various Extents of Special Middle Level Preparations, 1988



classroom, above grade 4 and 5—and adoption of the high school one—departmentalization—before grade 9, were undesirable features of the two-level organization dropped by many middle schools. Still, only about one-third of the middle schools reported the use of interdisciplinary organization in 1988.

Despite the progress in adopting interdisciplinary teaming, fewer schools had adopted flexible scheduling in 1988. The data were collected by grades in 1988 and cannot be easily compared with those for 1968, but 70 percent of schools in the 1968 survey reported the use of uniform daily periods. In 1988, this practice was used in grade 5 by 40 percent of the schools, in grade 6 by 67 percent, and in grades 7 and 8 by 82 percent. (See Table 2.) Hence, it is assumed that even some schools having an interdisciplinary organization may not be taking full advantage of its possibilities in combination with flexible scheduling to permit appropriate uses of time for varying purposes.

Comment

Middle level administrators may have difficulty implementing the interdisciplinary team organization and flexible scheduling, but those who have succeeded affirm the values of these organizational features. Teaching and learning can be easier and better with minimal barriers between subjects, classes, and periods.

TABLE 1
PERCENTS OF MIDDLE SCHOOLS UTILIZING CERTAIN PLANS FOR ORGANIZING INSTRUCTION IN BASIC SUBJECTS, GRADES 5-8, 1968 AND 1988

Subject Area	Grade	Interdisciplinary		Departmental		Self-Contained	
		1968	1988	1968	1988	1968	1988
Language Arts	5	3	33	20	26	60	38
	6	8	40	35	44	30	18
	7	6	31	74	66	1	6
	8	6	26	74	71	1	6
Math	5	3	31	33	31	50	36
	6	8	37	50	48	24	16
	7	6	27	88	71	0	5
	8	6	23	89	75	0	4
Science	5	3	30	30	26	55	39
	6	7	36	50	47	26	16
	7	5	26	87	71	0	4
	8	6	22	87	76	0	5
Social Studies	5	3	29	28	27	60	27
	6	7	37	39	46	32	17
	7	5	28	80	68	1	4
	8	6	23	76	23	2	5

2. An adequate guidance program, including a teacher advisory plan. The increase in the number of schools having full-time counselors, from 42 percent in 1968 to 78 percent in 1988, indicates progress in the total guidance program. Of particular interest is the advent of teacher guidance plans variously called "home base," "adviser-advisee," and "teacher advisory plans" so novel in 1968 that they were not included in the survey. In the 1988 survey, 39 percent of the schools said they had such a program. Of these schools, 77 percent had daily advisory periods with about two-thirds of the periods being more than 15 minutes in length.

TABLE 2
PERCENTS OF MIDDLE SCHOOLS USING CERTAIN TYPES OF SCHEDULING FOR INSTRUCTION BY GRADES, 1988

Criteria	Grade 5	Grade 6	Grade 7	Grade 8
Self-Contained Classroom	42	22	8	8
Daily Periods - Uniform	40	67	82	82
Flexible Scheduling Within Blocks for Teams	25	31	23	20
Daily Periods - Varying	19	14	11	11

Comment

Middle school principals and faculties should work closely with counselors to implement this important program. The largeness of schools, the complexities of society, and the unique developmental needs of early adolescents make continuing contact with one teacher/adviser an important, if not essential, feature of effective middle schools.

3. A full-scale exploratory program. Extensive data regarding their exploratory programs showed that the grades 5-8 and 6-8 middle schools continued the exploratory programs of the grades 7-9 junior highs, usually offering common exploratory subjects on a short-term, frequently rotating basis. Only one of the traditional exploratory subjects (see Table 3) became much less widely available from 1968 to 1988 in the middle schools—foreign language. Some subjects were less widely required, but more frequently elective, such as home economics and industrial arts. General music was less widely offered but elective offerings in instrumental music increased. The increased provision of reading instruction in the middle schools reflected the national interest in its importance.

Increased offerings in computers, creative writing,

health, and sex education in 1988 dramatically reflect school responses to social changes and pressures. In addition to these new courses, the write-ins on the forms added another 26 courses, each usually reported by only one school.

In addition to the foregoing course-type curriculum opportunities for interest exploration and development, the surveys also found, especially in 1988, many "activities" generally available on an elective basis and not offered as classes involving tests and grades. Most of the offerings seem consistent with the exploratory goal, although many educators will regard the increases reported in interschool sports for both boys and girls as undesirable. The percent of schools offering boys' and girls' intramural sports programs also increased significantly. (See Table 4.) In general, the increased offering in number and variety of exploratory subjects and activities confirms new middle schools' wide adherence to this earmark.

Comment

Middle level leaders have tried to recognize consistently the values at this level of extensive exploratory programs, and in general need only to maintain continuing evaluation of the offerings.

TABLE 3
PERCENTS OF MIDDLE SCHOOLS OFFERING CERTAIN TRADITIONAL EXPLORATORY SUBJECTS AS REQUIRED AND ELECTIVE IN GRADES 6, 7, AND 8, 1968 AND 1988

Subject	Grade 6		Grade 7		Grade 8	
	Percent		Percent		Percent	
	1968	1988	1968	1988	1968	1988
Art						
Required	74	64	65	50	50	39
Elective	20	17	30	36	40	46
Foreign Language						
Required	32	6	29	9	33	8
Elective	11	10	22	25	29	38
Home Economics						
Required	20	32	43	37	48	31
Elective	9	6	19	30	27	44
Industrial Arts						
Required	18	33	41	38	46	31
Elective	10	9	17	29	25	45
Music						
Required	86	53	67	36	59	25
Elective	34	14	48	18	56	20
Reading						
Required	23	84	25	70	23	60
Elective	17	1	17	5	18	10

TABLE 4
PERCENTS OF MIDDLE SCHOOLS OFFERING CERTAIN OTHER CURRICULUM OPPORTUNITIES (ACTIVITIES) IN GRADES 6, 7, AND 8, 1968 AND 1988

Curriculum Opportunity	Grade 6		Grade 7		Grade 8	
	Percent		Percent		Percent	
	1968	1988	1968	1988	1968	1988
Arts and Crafts	7	36	19	37	22	38
Honor Societies	2	20	5	36	6	39
Intramural Sports (Boys)	8	68	20	68	19	66
Intramural Sports (Girls)	7	67	22	65	21	64
Interschool Sports (Boys)	4	29	48	74	52	79
Interschool Sports (Girls)	1	28	19	74	23	78
Photography	4	10	8	15	9	20
Publications	4	36	18	49	25	58
School Parties	24	59	30	58	32	60
Social Dancing	5	47	31	65	37	70
Student Council (Government)	3	80	12	86	14	88

4. Comprehensive curriculum provision for the broad goals of personal development, continued learning skills, and basic knowledge. The critical nature of the personal development goal for the early adolescent requires a variety of approaches, including a teacher advisory plan, a wide offering of exploratory courses and activities, and a full program of health and physical education. All these provisions are increasingly present in the middle schools, except physical education, which is less uniformly taken daily throughout the middle grades.

As for basic knowledge areas, both the 1968 and 1988 surveys found that each of the four major subject areas—language arts, math, science, and social studies—was taken daily in almost 100 percent of middle schools. Certainly these areas are not neglected in the middle schools. We did not collect data on all continued learning skills, but we have already commented on the greatly increased percent of middle schools offering reading on a required basis in 1988 (84, 70, and 60 percent, respectively, in grades 6, 7, and 8). And computer usage, not available in 1968, was as required in 40, 40, and 38 percent of the schools in grades 6, 7, and 8, respectively, with additional

numbers having elective offerings.

In summary, full curriculum provisions for the four basic knowledge areas continued from 1968 to 1988, and some provisions for personal development and continued learning skills had become more frequent and numerous in 1988.

Comment

Middle level faculty members are well aware that for too many people, the middle grades constituted their last chance to acquire the skills and interests needed for lifelong learning. Both school dropouts and adult illiteracy rates can be reduced greatly if we apply the best motivating and learning devices available.

5. Varied and effective instructional methodology for the age group. The authors did not attempt the difficult task of collecting full data about the instructional practices in classrooms. We were, however, so interested in independent study that we included a related question in the 1968 survey and followed this up in 1988.

Considerable increases in opportunities for independent study were evident in the 1988 sample, indicating greater effort toward individualization of instruction in the middle school of 1988. Like most indicators, too few schools have implemented the earmark fully, but there has been considerable progress in 20 years.

Comment

Again, many schools in the middle must adopt more widely the practices used in other successful middle schools.

6. Continued orientation and articulation for students, parents, and teachers. The school in the middle, whatever grades included, must justify its existence by serving as a strong bridge between elementary and high school. Furthermore, as a relatively new school (68 percent of our 1988 sample had been established in the past 15 years, 31 percent in the last 7) operating more or less in terms of a new concept and set of goals, middle schools must continue for at least another generation to maintain vigorous orientation programs for incoming students, parents, and staff members — most of whom have little if any understanding of the new school unit.

Consequently, we asked about preparatory activities in both surveys and found considerable increase in orientation programs. Still, only 53 percent (as compared with 25 percent in 1968) reported use of a "year or more of faculty study and planning."

Comparison of the surveys showed perceptible increase in visitation to the next level as part of orientation. In addition, more middle schools provide information to the schools below and above, and more middle school students are enrolled in advanced courses at the high school. In only one factor did the percent drop in 20 years: "obtaining or providing data regarding students entering or leaving your schools." However, two-thirds or more of the middle schools in both surveys reported the use of joint workshops and joint curriculum planning activities with teachers of lower and higher grades, and of sharing data about students from level to level.

Comment

Middle level coordinators have challenging opportunities to lead the way in connection with this sixth earmark. Principals and other administrators of schools in the middle must work together to plan for districtwide orientation. Appropriate representatives of feeder elementary schools and their receiving middle level school and, similarly, those of feeder middle schools and their receiving high schools, need leadership in planning and implementing specific means of aiding the successful transition of learners from level to level.

Which Grade Organization?

The term "middle level school" is widely used to include all schools that are preceded by elementary and followed by secondary schools. Figure A showed four relatively large grade groupings of such schools: Grades 5-8, 6-8, 7-8, and 8-9. There were also 573 schools that used "other" grade groupings. This approximately 5 percent of the total number of schools (and of the sample) was not considered large enough to include in the analysis and presentation of the data about differences between grade groupings.

The provision of the following features of middle level organization differed very little between the major grade groupings: housing arrangements, means of articulation, independent study opportunities, and attitudes toward the grade organization. As for the various other items, an especially strong tendency toward similarities between the grades 5-8 and 6-8 organizations was noted.

Similarly, the grades 7-8 and 7-9 schools tended to be more alike than either one was with the other groupings. Therefore, for convenience and also to emphasize these similarities, grades 5-8 and 6-8 schools are considered as middle school types and the grades 7-8 and 7-9 schools are considered as junior high school types. The differences shown by our 1988 survey were greatest between these two groups on the following points:

- The departmentalized plan of instruction is used more in the junior high types, and the interdisciplinary plan is more popular in the middle school types. (See Figures C and D for percents of middle and junior high school types using interdisciplinary teaming and departmentalization respectively in grade 8.)
- Uniform daily periods are used most in the junior high types, and flexible scheduling is used more in the middle school types. (See Figure E.)

- The reasons for establishing the school originally were slightly more administrative in the junior high school types and more program/student-related in the middle school types.
- Higher percentages of teachers and principals were involved in the decision to establish the new organizations of the middle school types.
- Traditional exploratory subjects tended to be more frequently required in the middle school types than in the junior high school types.
- More use of random assignment for grouping in basic subjects and advisory programs was found in the middle school types.
- Foreign languages were offered more frequently by the junior high types.
- The middle school types, as might be expected, were usually more recently established.

Certain comparisons also indicated that each grade grouping had some distinctive differences from the other three grade groups. Some relevant differences follow:

Grades 5-8 schools:

Made most use of informal pupil progress reports

Made most use of the self-contained classroom organization, but primarily for grades 5 and 6

Made most use of home base teachers (advisers) and other personnel in counseling.

Grades 6-8 schools:

Used more visitation of schools with similar plans in operation as a preparatory activity

Made more use than did grades 7-9 schools of random assignment for grouping in basic subjects

Made most use of interdisciplinary team organization and flexible scheduling.

Grades 7-8 schools:

Had the highest percent of newer exploratory subjects as required

Had the highest use of uniform daily periods.

Grades 7-9 schools:

Had the shortest daily advisory periods

Tended to have the largest enrollments

Undoubtedly because of the widespread acceptance of secondary school preparation, had the largest percent of faculty with special preparation

Had the lowest percent of science and math inclusion in interdisciplinary organization for grades 7 and 8.

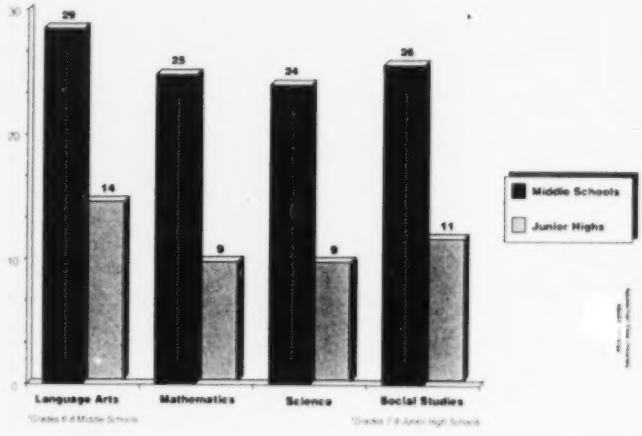
Closing Comments

The earmarks against which we checked some of our data about school characteristics should be present in all good schools in the middle, although we expect that changes will develop and other earmarks will be added. Continued discussion, experimentation, and evaluation are essential for agreement on the essential goals and practices of schools in the middle.

After another one or two decades, with a greater supply of personnel who have had the special preparation

Figure C

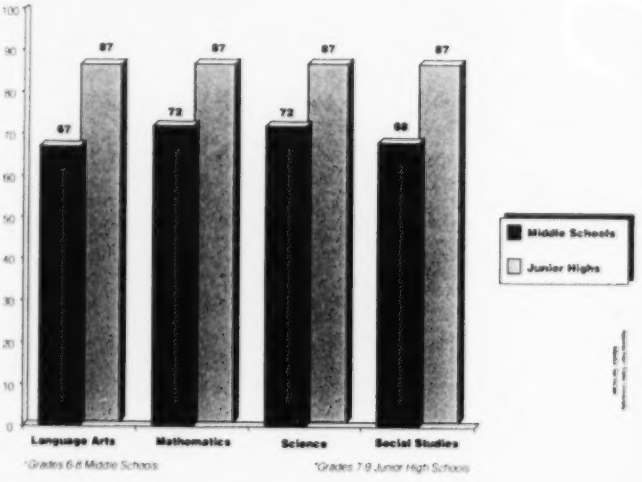
Percent of Middle and Junior High Schools Utilizing Interdisciplinary Teaming in Selected Subjects, Grade 8, 1988*



*Grades 6-8 Middle Schools *Grades 7-9 Junior High Schools

Figure D

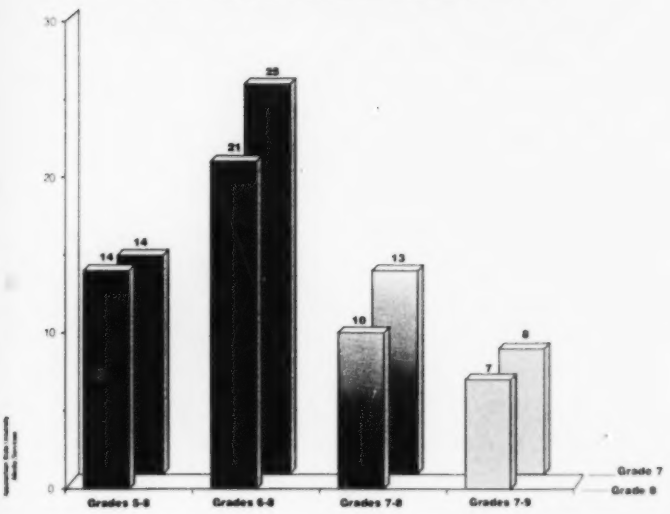
Percents of Middle and Junior High Schools Utilizing Departmentalization in Selected Subjects, Grade 8, 1988*



*Grades 6-8 Middle Schools *Grades 7-9 Junior High Schools

Figure E

Percents of Middle Level Schools Utilizing Flexible Scheduling By Grade Organizations, Grades 7 and 8, 1988



needed, greater unanimity of practice and higher quality of education in the middle should be evident. Without such progress, the much-sought significant improvement in America's total educational program is unlikely if not impossible.

As the Carnegie Task Force on Education of Young Adolescents recently declared: "The success of the transformed middle grade school will stand or fall on the willingness of teachers and other staff to invest their efforts in the young adolescent students. Teachers must understand and want to teach young adolescents and find the middle grade school a rewarding place to work."

The major tasks of leadership in middle level education must focus on the persistent needs of early adolescents for healthy growth and development, for motivation toward and acquisition of essential skills of communication and learning, for exploration and development of worthwhile interests, and for an increasing store of basic knowledge.

Endnotes

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5. William M Alexander and C. Kenneth McEwin, Schools in the Middle: Status and Progress (Columbus, Ohio: National Middle School Association, 1989). Available from National Middle School Association, 4807 Evanswood Drive, Columbus, Ohio, $10.
6. See for example, George E. Melton, "The Junior High School: Successes and Failures," and William M. Alexander, "The Middle School Emerges and Flourishes," in Perspectives: Middle School Education, 1964-84 edited by John H. Lounsbury (Columbus, Ohio: National Middle School Association, 1984).
7. C. Kenneth McEwin and William M. Alexander, Report of Middle Level Teacher Education Programs: A Second Survey (1986-1987) (Boone, N.C.: Appalachian State University, 1987).
8. Representative of current lists are these from two organizations actively engaged in middle level school publications and other programs: National Middle School Association, This We Believe, 1982, and National Association of Secondary School Principals, An Agenda for Excellence at the Middle Level, undated. Also see the Carnegie Council task report's list of related recommendations.

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